

## Chapter 65. The Workmen.

Toward midnight Charles heard a great noise beneath his window. It arose from blows of hammer and hatchet, clinking of pincers and cranching of saws.

Lying dressed upon his bed, the noise awoke him with a start and found a gloomy echo in his heart. He could not endure it, and sent Parry to ask the sentinel to beg the workmen to strike more gently and not disturb the last slumber of one who had been their king. The sentinel was unwilling to leave his post, but allowed Parry to pass.

Arriving at the window Parry found an unfinished scaffold, over which they were nailing a covering of black serge. Raised to the height of twenty feet, so as to be on a level with the window, it had two lower stories. Parry, odious as was this sight to him, sought for those among some eight or ten workmen who were making the most noise; and fixed on two men, who were loosening the last hooks of the iron balcony.

"My friends," said Parry, mounting the scaffold and standing beside them, "would you work a little more quietly? The king wishes to get a sleep."

One of the two, who was standing up, was of gigantic size and was driving a pick with all his might into the wall, whilst the other,

kneeling beside him, was collecting the pieces of stone. The face of the first was lost to Parry in the darkness; but as the second turned around and placed his finger on his lips Parry started back in amazement.

"Very well, very well," said the workman aloud, in excellent English.

"Tell the king that if he sleeps badly to-night he will sleep better to-morrow night."

These blunt words, so terrible if taken literally, were received by the other workmen with a roar of laughter. But Parry withdrew, thinking he was dreaming.

Charles was impatiently awaiting his return. At the moment he re-entered, the sentinel who guarded the door put his head through the opening, curious as to what the king was doing. The king was lying on his bed, resting on his elbow. Parry closed the door and approaching the king, his face radiant with joy:

"Sire," he said, in a low voice, "do you know who these workmen are who are making so much noise?"

"I? No; how would you have me know?"

Parry bent his head and whispered to the king: "It is the Comte de la Fere and his friends."

"Raising my scaffold!" cried the king, astounded.

"Yes, and at the same time making a hole in the wall."

The king clasped his hands and raised his eyes to Heaven; then leaping down from his bed he went to the window, and pulling aside the curtain tried to distinguish the figures outside, but in vain.

Parry was not wrong. It was Athos he had recognized, and Porthos who was boring a hole through the wall.

This hole communicated with a kind of loft--the space between the floor of the king's room and the ceiling of the one below it. Their plan was to pass through the hole they were making into this loft and cut out from below a piece of the flooring of the king's room, so as to form a kind of trap-door.

Through this the king was to escape the next night, and, hidden by the black covering of the scaffold, was to change his dress for that of a workman, slip out with his deliverers, pass the sentinels, who would suspect nothing, and so reach the skiff that was waiting for him at Greenwich.

Day gilded the tops of the houses. The aperture was finished and Athos passed through it, carrying the clothes destined for the king wrapped in black cloth, and the tools with which he was to open a communication with the king's room. He had only two hours' work to do to open communication with the king and, according to the calculations of the four friends, they had the entire day before them, since, the executioner being absent, another must be sent for to Bristol.

D'Artagnan returned to change his workman's clothes for his chestnut-colored suit, and Porthos to put on his red doublet. As for Aramis, he went off to the bishop's palace to see if he could possibly pass in with Juxon to the king's presence. All three agreed to meet at noon in Whitehall Place to see how things went on.

Before leaving the scaffold Aramis had approached the opening where Athos was concealed to tell him that he was about to make an attempt to gain another interview with the king.

"Adieu, then, and be of good courage," said Athos. "Report to the king the condition of affairs. Say to him that when he is alone it will help us if he will knock on the floor, for then I can continue my work in safety. Try, Aramis, to keep near the king. Speak loud, very loud, for they will be listening at the door. If there is a sentinel within the apartment, kill him without hesitation. If there are two, let Parry kill one and you the other. If there are three, let yourself be slain, but save the king."

"Be easy," said Aramis; "I will take two poniards and give one to Parry. Is that all?"

"Yes, go; but urge the king strongly not to stand on false generosity. While you are fighting if there is a fight, he must flee. The trap once replaced over his head, you being on the trap, dead or alive, they will need at least ten minutes to find the hole by which he has escaped. In those ten minutes we shall have gained the road and the king will be

saved."

"Everything shall be done as you say, Athos. Your hand, for perhaps we shall not see each other again."

Athos put his arm around Aramis's neck and embraced him.

"For you," he said. "Now if I die, say to D'Artagnan that I love him as a son, and embrace him for me. Embrace also our good and brave Porthos. Adieu."

"Adieu," said Aramis. "I am as sure now that the king will be saved as I am sure that I clasp the most loyal hand in the world."

Aramis parted from Athos, went down from the scaffold in his turn and took his way to the hotel, whistling the air of a song in praise of Cromwell. He found the other two friends sitting at table before a good fire, drinking a bottle of port and devouring a cold chicken. Porthos was cursing the infamous parliamentarians; D'Artagnan ate in silence, revolving in his mind the most audacious plans.

Aramis related what had been agreed upon. D'Artagnan approved with a movement of the head and Porthos with his voice.

"Bravo!" he said; "besides, we shall be there at the time of the flight. What with D'Artagnan, Grimaud and Mousqueton, we can manage to dispatch eight of them. I say nothing about Blaisois, for he is only fit to hold the horses. Two minutes a man makes four minutes. Mousqueton will lose

another, that's five; and in five minutes we shall have galloped a quarter of a league."

Aramis swallowed a hasty mouthful, gulped a glass of wine and changed his clothes.

"Now," said he, "I'm off to the bishop's. Take care of the executioner, D'Artagnan."

"All right. Grimaud has relieved Mousqueton and has his foot on the cellar door."

"Well, don't be inactive."

"Inactive, my dear fellow! Ask Porthos. I pass my life upon my legs."

Aramis again presented himself at the bishop's. Juxon consented the more readily to take him with him, as he would require an assistant priest in case the king should wish to communicate. Dressed as Aramis had been the night before, the bishop got into his carriage, and the former, more disguised by his pallor and sad countenance than his deacon's dress, got in by his side. The carriage stopped at the door of the palace.

It was about nine o'clock in the morning.

Nothing was changed. The ante-rooms were still full of soldiers, the passages still lined by guards. The king was already sanguine, but when he perceived Aramis his hope turned to joy. He embraced Juxon

and pressed the hand of Aramis. The bishop affected to speak in a loud voice, before every one, of their previous interview. The king replied that the words spoken in that interview had borne their fruit, and that he desired another under the same conditions. Juxon turned to those present and begged them to leave him and his assistant alone with the king. Every one withdrew. As soon as the door was closed:

"Sire," said Aramis, speaking rapidly, "you are saved; the London executioner has vanished. His assistant broke his leg last night beneath your majesty's window--the cry we heard was his--and there is no executioner nearer at hand than Bristol."

"But the Comte de la Fere?" asked the king.

"Two feet below you; take the poker from the fireplace and strike three times on the floor. He will answer you."

The king did so, and the moment after, three muffled knocks, answering the given signal, sounded beneath the floor.

"So," said Charles, "he who knocks down there----"

"Is the Comte de la Fere, sire," said Aramis. "He is preparing a way for your majesty to escape. Parry, for his part, will raise this slab of marble and a passage will be opened."

"Oh, Juxon," said the king, seizing the bishop's two hands in his own, "promise that you will pray all your life for this gentleman and for

the other that you hear beneath your feet, and for two others also, who, wherever they may be, are on the watch for my safety."

"Sire," replied Juxon, "you shall be obeyed."

Meanwhile, the miner underneath was heard working away incessantly, when suddenly an unexpected noise resounded in the passage. Aramis seized the poker and gave the signal to stop; the noise came nearer and nearer. It was that of a number of men steadily approaching. The four men stood motionless. All eyes were fixed on the door, which opened slowly and with a kind of solemnity.

A parliamentary officer, clothed in black and with a gravity that augured ill, entered, bowed to the king, and unfolding a parchment, read the sentence, as is usually done to criminals before their execution.

"What is this?" said Aramis to Juxon.

Juxon replied with a sign which meant that he knew no more than Aramis about it.

"Then it is for to-day?" asked the king.

"Was not your majesty warned that it was to take place this morning?"

"Then I must die like a common criminal by the hand of the London executioner?"



"The London executioner has disappeared, your majesty, but a man has offered his services instead. The execution will therefore only be delayed long enough for you to arrange your spiritual and temporal affairs."

A slight moisture on his brow was the only trace of emotion that Charles evinced, as he learned these tidings. But Aramis was livid. His heart ceased beating, he closed his eyes and leaned upon the table. Charles perceived it and took his hand.

"Come, my friend," said he, "courage." Then he turned to the officer.

"Sir, I am ready. There is but little reason why I should delay you.

Firstly, I wish to communicate; secondly, to embrace my children and bid them farewell for the last time. Will this be permitted me?"

"Certainly," replied the officer, and left the room.

Aramis dug his nails into his flesh and groaned aloud.

"Oh! my lord bishop," he cried, seizing Juxon's hands, "where is Providence? where is Providence?"

"My son," replied the bishop, with firmness, "you see Him not, because the passions of the world conceal Him."

"My son," said the king to Aramis, "do not take it so to heart. You ask what God is doing. God beholds your devotion and my martyrdom, and believe me, both will have their reward. Ascribe to men, then, what is

happening, and not to God. It is men who drive me to death; it is men who make you weep."

"Yes, sire," said Aramis, "yes, you are right. It is men whom I should hold responsible, and I will hold them responsible."

"Be seated, Juxon," said the king, falling upon his knees. "I have now to confess to you. Remain, sir," he added to Aramis, who had moved to leave the room. "Remain, Parry. I have nothing to say that cannot be said before all."

Juxon sat down, and the king, kneeling humbly before him, began his confession.